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Commentary

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A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections

Two contributions to IRIS No. 9 (Spring 1989) make reference to arguments I have made about cinema in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (hereafter *NiFF*) and in my essay in that issue (''A Case for Cognitivism,'' pp. 11–40; hereafter, ''CfC''). In his Editorial, ''Cognitivism: Quests and Questionings'' (pp. 1–10; hereafter, ''QQ''), Dudley Andrew discusses the papers he solicited for the issue. Marcia Butzel's ''Paradigms for Cognitivism?: The Perception of Movement and Film Choreography'' (pp. 105–117; hereafter ''PfC?'') discusses both my book and, curiously, my paper in the same issue.[1] I take this opportunity to make some brief comments on both pieces.

In general, ''QQ'' significantly misconstrues my arguments. In addition, it presents, in my opinion, an oversimplified account of cognitivism and film theory in general.

First, the misconstrual of my views. Andrew claims that I regard interpretation as being ''untestable and often willfully idiosyncratic'' (p. 6). I have never made this charge and do not believe it to be a valid one. Interpretations are tested and revised within the institutional practice of film criticism, and they are usually far from idiosyncratic, as I try to show in a recent study.[2] Furthermore, I have never ''insisted'' (p. 6) that interpretation should ''respect'' what cognitive science conceives as ''the phenomenal object of typical narration'' (p. 6); in fact, I am at a loss to understand what that would entail.

Nor do I declare that cognitive theory is ''insensitive to the 'affective' afterglow of narrative comprehension'' (p. 6). I presume that Andrew is thinking of a remark made on p. 30 of *NiFF:*

> This is not because I think that emotion is irrelevant to our experience of cinematic storytelling—far from it—but because I am concerned with the aspects of viewing that

lead to constructing the story and its world. I am assuming that a spectator's comprehension of the film's narrative is theoretically separable from his or her emotional responses (p. 30).

This passage, which speaks of a theoretical idealization for the sake of explanatory specificity, does not support Andrew's claim that I have a "rather severe attitude toward the pleasures and values of viewing and studying film" (p. 6). In addition, Andrew's use of the metaphor "afterglow" is misjudged, since affect need not follow, or follow from, from comprehension, and I never argued that such is the case. Moreover, as "CfC" asserts (p. 32), emotional qualities are at once a controversial topic within cognitive theory and a central concern of many particular theories. Works like Noël Carroll's and other studies citied in my essay offer strong alternatives to psychoanalytical accounts of emotion. It is, therefore, inaccurate to claim that I declare emotional qualities to be "waters . . . too murky to fish in" (p. 6).

Andrew claims that I have been involved in "diatribes" against what I see as "the continental fads that have dominated the field" (p. 6). Since no footnote clarifies this claim, I confess myself bewildered. I have drawn on continental thinkers (Barthes, Genette, et al.) in my work. If the Slavic formalist tradition counts as continental, I obviously owe that much as well. True, I have criticized continental thinkers, and British ones, and American ones, but never on grounds of faddishness.

More broadly, I believe that Andrew's characterization of cognitivism lacks nuance. For one thing, he persistently reduces cognitivist theory to cognitive psychology—a reduction my article was at paints to criticize and avoid (pp. 28–32). Similarly, contrary to Andrew's claims, a cognitive position does not necessarily rule out psychoanalytic accounts (p. 2). My essay's opening sally about an all-purpose world view suggests that by discriminating among middle-range problems we can avoid the melodramatic clash of abstract doctrines and concentrate on the extent to which different theories offer truly competing explanations of particular problems.

There are other moments of oversimplification in "QQ." While much cognitive theory does concentrate on normal cases, as my article indicates, it does not avoid the "complex deformations of vision and narration produced by sophisticated artists" (p. 5). First, the article talks about such cases (pp. 22–23, 27). Second, a great many cognitivist accounts of art tackle works by major artists; Gombrich's writing is an obvious example. In a more modest way, *NiFF* uses cognitive theory to examine films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Bertolucci, Jancsó, Resnais, Fassbinder, Godard, and Bresson.

Andrew also suggests that cognitive theory makes "the fewest possible theoretical assumptions" (p. 3), and that it will replace philosophical

questions with ones that can "be tested empirically on audiences" (p. 8). Once again, my essay sought to address the empirical/conceptual distinction by showing how cognitivism is in a long *philosophical* tradition of naturalistic inquiry (to which, I repeat, Freud belongs). And anyone who picks up a volume by Putnam, Fodor, Dennett, or Stich ought to be warned that, *contra* "QQ," avoidance of theoretical assumptions is not a hallmark of cognitive philosophy.

This is perhaps connected to what I regard as one of the biggest problems in "QQ": an oversimplified conception of science. Andrew equates empirical evidence with "experimental" evidence and further assumes that this involves only tests of a rather constrained kind (p. 3). But empirical evidence, in scientific inquiry as in life, comes in many varieties: the observations of the anthropologist, the native-speaker-intuitions of the linguist, subjects' reports of their mental activities (including dreams) in psychological research. Moreover, Andrew assumes that to study film from the cognitivist perspective is to make it "merely a site or means of investigating psychological and sociological laws" (p. 8). But the issue of whether sciences, especially human sciences, reveal "laws" is one of the most contested in the philosophy of science, and many theorists would argue that a deductive-nomological concept fails to capture scientists' actual activities. Again, my essay's discussion of this issue confronts this version of the science bogeyman (pp. 16–17), but Andrew does not address my treatment of the topic there.

Furthermore, Andrew's introduction presents excessively schematic accounts of the history and conduct of film theory. Throughout "QQ" runs a dichotomy between continental and American film theory that seems to me oversimplified. (Where do the British, the Canadians, the Russians, the East Europeans, the Chinese, the Japanese, and others fit into this bipolar-world model? And why should we think of film theories along national lines in the first place?) Andrew also posits an affinity between persistence of vision and a psychoanalytic theory of mind (p. 2) by imputing a passivity to both, but I would argue that Freudian psychoanalysis is a dynamic theory of mind, in which the unconscious is no mere "palimpsest" but rather a process.

Elsewhere, Andrew seems to map the conceptual/empirical split onto the field of film studies, asserting that only the cognitivist will "haughtily demand of opposing paradigms that they support their claims, whenever possible, with empirical evidence" (p. 3). But doesn't everybody feel obliged to do this? Virtually all theoretical writing in film offers empirical evidence in the form of citations from sources, descriptions of shots or scenes, frame enlargements, appeals to everyday experience or Freudian case studies, and so forth. On the whole, film theory tends toward probabilistic, inductive arguments. Strictly deductive film theory flourishes chiefly in the writings of the "cognitivist" Noël Carroll.

So far my comments have been confined to the logic of Andrew's argument. But the editorial's schematism is also evident when the piece is read through the hermeneute's spectacles. Whereas cognitivists like Carroll and myself launch "diatribes" (p. 6), arguments against us form part of a "debate" (p. 1) or "critique" (p. 6). Cognitivism has a "jargon" (p. 2), whereas psychoanalytic film theory has "vocabularies" (p. 2). And by comparing modular psychology or psycholinguistics with psychoanalysis and structural linguistics, "QQ" finds the pertinent criterion of value to be their "right to prestige" (p. 7)—surely not the only, or the best, standard of a discipline's worth, however much the criterion may have been invoked rhetorically in film theory of the past.

Butzel's "PfC?" focuses on somewhat different issues. In the course of her discussion of Virginia Brooks' article, she claims that visual perceptual activity is the founding "metaphor" of cognitive research, and that more specifically cognitivism's conception of motion perception is at once too narrow in its own domain and too broad when applied to a wide range of spectatorial activities (p. 108). With respect to my work, Butzel suggests first that I "lean too hard" on visual perception "to model cue-processing and hypothesis-testing procedures without offering evidence that similar processes occur with verbal and auditory cinematic phenomena" (p. 107). Actually, I do offer a little evidence of this sort in *NiFF* (pp. 312, 330–331), and more in "CfC" (e.g., pp. 12, 18, 30). Had a synthesis such as Jackendoff's *Consciousness and the Computational Mind* (cited in the article) been available when I wrote *NiFF*, I could have borrowed convincing examples from his account of verbal and musical comprehension. And while "CfC" draws its principal examples from visual perception, I acknowledge the existence of cognitive accounts of acoustic phenomena (p. 32). It was not possible to cover every area of research in an orientational piece like this.

More broadly, I do not think that "PfC?" shows that perception plays a founding metaphorical role in cognitivism generally. Most cognitive theorizing does not take thought to be like perception; rather, perception is taken to be like thought in certain respects (it works with assumptions, expectations, probabilistic inferences from data, etc.). This point is made in my article (p. 18). Vision thus becomes a paradigm case of perceptual-cognitive activity, not a founding premise for accounts of other activities, such as figuring out a crossword puzzle or deciding whom to marry. In the light of the enormous cognitive research on speech processing and musical comprehension and performance, the burden of proof, I think, falls to Butzel. She would need to show that even this work relies upon a visual-perception model. As for my writings, *NiFF* introduces its treatment of spatial perception in Chapter 7, only after broader cognitive activities have been introduced as an explanatory framework. It therefore remains to

be proven that in my work or in the cognitivist tradition "a theory of motion picture perception is used to describe all spectatorial activities" (p. 107).

Butzel's other principal point is that historical contexts tend to be ignored in cognitive accounts. At its worst cognitivism takes "an ahistorical attitude toward theorizing"; at best it makes "vague or restricted references to history in representations and schemata" ("PfC?" p. 110). I do not know exactly what Butzel means by "history" (and especially "restricted references" to it), but suffice it to say that I do not think that the historical claims about stylistic and narrative schemata offered in my portions of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema,* or in *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* or *NiFF,* are vague. Again, she would seem to be obliged to show that they are. Moreover, as indicated throughout "CfC" (especially pp. 28–32), many trends within cognitivism seek to explain how social life is collectively and historically constructed. My discussion of these trends is ignored in Butzel's critique.

Finally, Butzel asks if the emphasis on explanations in "CfC" does not require commitments to metaphorical and narrative processes. Theorizing by means of analogy is of course normal scientific practice. My objections are addressed to film studies' practice of translating concepts, themselves often unanalyzed for coherence and empirical adequacy, into stories, even highly metaphorical ones, and using the result as explanations. Butzel's own reading of *Blood Wedding* in "PfC?" is a case in point. Like many contemporary theorists, she treats "history" as a thematic element in the organization of the film text (choreography as "history-making," singing as a record of the moment: "Image and sound are foregrounded as historical representations," p. 112). This is a good illustration of my contention in "CfC" (p. 17) that the hermeneutic bent of contemporary theory turns purely theoretical ideas into allegories of textual structure. Not all paradigms of inquiry rely on allegorical interpretation of this sort, and my point was that cognitivism is one paradigm that does not.

There are many other points of a substantive nature in both pieces that deserve comment, but before real discussion can begin it seems necessary to be clear about what the participants are saying. In many cases, Andrew's and Butzel's objections are exactly those that my article—and its recommendations for further reading—directly addressed. In the spirit of debate, not diatribe, I ask simply that this, and other, cases for cognitivism be granted more attentive reading and more scrupulous exposition.

Notes

1. I say "curiously" because to my knowledge no other contributor had access to my paper. Like hers, it was solicited and written specifically for this issue. Evidently the editor gave Butzel access to my paper. No similar access to other contributors' work was offered to me or, as far as I know, to any other contributor. This runs contrary to orthodox editorial procedures at scholarly journals. It is particularly questionable since Butzel's prepublication access to the paper serves as the basis for adverse comments.

2. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).